

FORT WORTH STAR TELEGRAM

MAY 20 1987

Webster wins confirmation as CIA director

STAR-7-4 A3

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Knight-Ridder News Service

WASHINGTON — Voting 94-1, the Senate Tuesday confirmed FBI Director William Webster as director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

In a quick vote, the Senate ended months of controversy and debate over who should head the intelligence agency.

In another development Tuesday, Senate Majority Leader Robert Byrd, D-W.Va., introduced legislation to limit the CIA chief and his deputy to single seven-year terms to guarantee that they "have a degree of independence that would make it possible for the agency to resist pressure to engage in questionable or illegal activities."

Byrd said he was proposing the change — the posts currently have no set length — in response to revelations of CIA involvement in the Iran-contra affair. "The CIA needs protection from political pressure," Byrd said.

Only Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., voted against the confirmation of Webster, 63, who has served more than nine years of his 10-year term as FBI chief.

Reid has complained of the FBI's handling of the case of Harry E. Claiborne, a former federal judge from Nevada now serving a two-year prison term for income tax evasion. In October, the Senate used its impeachment power for the first time in a half century to strip Claiborne of his lifetime appointment to the federal bench.

"William Webster may be a decent and honorable man, but an administrator he is not," Reid said. "He is not the man to cure the CIA of its ills. Rather, I would urge my colleagues to leave him at the FBI."

Sens. David Boren, D-Okla., and William Cohen, R-Maine, chairman and vice chairman of the Intelligence Committee, which unanimously approved Webster's nomination this month, praised the former St. Louis federal judge and urged that he be confirmed.

Boren asked for approval of the nomination so that Webster can "get on with the important work at hand at the Central Intelligence Agency," which has been without a permanent director since William Casey stepped down Jan. 29 after surgery for brain cancer. He died May 8.

Webster was the second person nominated to succeed Casey. The first was Robert Gates, CIA deputy director, whose nomination was withdrawn after Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., charged that Gates may have helped Casey deceive Congress in November about the Iran-contra affair.

In proposing to limit Webster and his successors to a single fixed term, Byrd said:

"Evidence that emerged in the Iran-contra hearings that former CIA Director Casey was far more deeply involved than originally thought in helping the contras get military supplies and the controversial nomination of Robert Gates as CIA director earlier this year suggest that it would be wise to provide a degree of independence to the two top people at the CIA."

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